

## Final Exam: A Surgeon's Reflections on Mortality by Pauline W. Chen *Alfred A. Knopf, 2007*

---

### Summary<sup>1</sup>

A brilliant transplant surgeon brings compassion and narrative drama to the fearful reality that every doctor must face: the inevitability of mortality. When Pauline Chen began medical school, she dreamed of saving lives. What she could not predict was how much death would be a part of her work. Almost immediately, she found herself wrestling with medicine's most profound paradox - that a profession premised on caring for the ill also systematically depersonalizes dying. *Final Exam* follows Chen over the course of her education and practice as she struggles to reconcile the lessons of her training with her innate sense of empathy and humanity.

### Ethics Issues

- Medical education
- Patient-provider relationships
- Patient-family relationships
- Organizational ethics
- Substitute decision-making
- End-of-life decision-making
- Advance care planning
- Virtue ethics

### Discussion Questions

1. How do Pauline Chen's ideals and expectations of her medical career change during the course of her career? How does she change as a person and a physician?
2. Is there a difference between the education Chen receives as a student from physicians and from patients? If so, what is the relevance of these differences to health ethics issues she encounters?
3. What organizational ethics issues does Chen identify with the health care system?
4. When describing dissecting a cadaver, Chen says that "we need to learn to separate our emotional self from our scientific self; we must view this dead human body not as 'one of us' but as 'one of them,' a medical case to be understood but not embraced." (p. 8) Is medical education – and health care in general - overly focused on ignoring emotions such as empathy, compassion, fear, and love? If so, what are the implications of this?
5. Chen states that, "We learn not only to avoid but also to define death as the result of errors, imperfect technique, and poor judgment. Death is no longer a natural event but a ritual gone awry" (p. 95). What are the values that underlie this definition of death? What are the consequences of defining death in this way?
6. In Chen's view, doctors feel the "need to be infallible in a highly variable world" (p. 119) Do you agree or disagree? Why?
7. Virtue ethics theory asks us to think about who our moral heroes are and to consider what it is that makes them virtuous. In this book, Chen describes fellow physicians that she admires. What is it about their work and character that resonates with her? Do you think that she would consider these physicians her moral heroes? Discuss who your moral heroes are.
8. Discuss the final passage of the book in which Chen writes about the death of a patient: "I began to speak, saying what I always did to grieving loved ones. I wish I could have cured him, I wish I could have done more. But then I heard Alfred's brother-in-law thanking me yet again for helping Alfred die at home and with his family. 'You know, Dr. Chen,' he said, 'it was just as he had

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the publisher's summary

wished.' It was then I realized that I *had* done more. I had comforted my patient and his family. I had eased their suffering. I had been present for them during life and despite death. I had caught a glimpse of the doctor I could become."